Records the Terrifying Emotions of a Man In Danger of Falling Into the Wholesale Destruction He Has Planned For Others

A PLOT UNFOLDED IN STEVENSON'S MOST GRAPHIC AND REALISTIC STYLE

THE STORY of a BOMB

BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

He Was Plucked From a Watery Grave.

CHAPTER I.

The Mission.

THIS is the story told to an unwilling listener by Zero, head of the great dynamiters' society:

I dined by appointment with one of our most trusted agents in a private chamber at St. James' hall. It was McGuire, the most chivalrous of creatures, but not himself expert in our contrivances. Hence the necessity of our meeting, for I need not remind you what enormous issues depend upon the nice adjustment of the engine. I set our little petard for half an hour, the scene of action being hard by, and the better to avert miscarriage employed a device, a recent invention of my own, by which the opening of the Gladstone bag in which the bomb was carried should instantly determine the explosion.

McGuire was somewhat dashed by this arrangement, which was new to him, and pointed out with excellent, clear sense that should he be arrested it would probably involve him in the fall of our opponents. But I was not to be moved, made a strong appeal to his patriotism, gave him a good glass of whisky and dispatched him on his glorious errand.

Our objective was the effigy of Shakespeare in Leicester square, a spot I think admirably chosen not only for the sake of the dramatist, still very foolishly claimed as a glory by the English race, in spite of his disgusting political opinions, but from the fact that the seats in the immediate neighborhood are often thronged by children, errand boys, unfortunate young ladies of the poorer class and infirm old men—all classes making a direct appeal to public pity and therefore suitable with our designs. As McGuire drew near his heart was inflamed by the most noble sentiment of triumph.

Never had he seen the garden so crowded. Children still stumbling in the impotence of youth ran to and fro, shouting and playing, round the pedestal. An old, sick pensioner sat upon the nearest bench, a medal on his breast, a stick with which he walked (for he was disabled by wounds) reclining on his knee. Guilty England would thus be stabbed in the most delicate quarters. The moment had, indeed, been well selected, and McGuire, with a radiant prevision of the event, drew merrily nearer. Suddenly his eye alighted on the burly form of a policeman standing hard by the effigy in an attitude of watch.

My bold companion paused. He looked about him closely. Here and there, at different points of the inclosure, other men stood or loitered, affecting an abstraction, feigning to gaze upon the shrubs, feigning to talk, feigning to be weary and to rest upon the benches. McGuire was no child in these affairs. He instantly divined one of the plots of the ingenious government. A chief difficulty with which we have to deal is a certain nervousness in the subaltern branches of the corps. As the hour of some design draws near these chicken souled conspirators appear to suffer some revulsion of intent and frequently dispatch to the authorities not, indeed, specific denunciations, but vague, anonymous scarednes

But for this purely accidental circumstance England had [illegible] a historical expression. On the receipt of such a letter the government lays a trap for its adversaries and surrounds the threatened spot with hirelings. My blood sometimes boils in my veins when I consider the case of those who sell themselves for money in such a cause.

True thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we patriots receive a very comfortable stipend. I myself, of course, touch a salary which puts me quite beyond the reach of any peddling, [illegible] thought. McGuire, again, ere he joined our ranks was on the brink of starving and now, thank God, receives a decent income.

That is as it should be. The patriot must not be diverted from his task by any base consideration, and the distinction between our position and that of the police is too obvious to be stated.

Plainly, however, our Leicester square design had been divulged. The government had craftily filled the place with minions. Even the pensioner was not improbably a hireling in disguise, and our emissary, without other aid or protection than the simple apparatus in his bag, found himself confronted by force—brutal force—that strong hand which was a character of the ages of oppression.

Should he venture to deposit the machine it was almost certain that he would be observed and arrested. A cry would arise, and there was just a fear that the police might be present in sufficient force to protect him from the savagery of the mob. The scheme must be delayed. He stood with his bag on his arm, pretending to survey the front of the Alhambra, when there flashed into his mind a thought to appall the bravest. The machine was set. At the appointed hour it must explode, and how in the interval was he to be rid of it?

Put yourself, I beseech you, into the place of that patriot. There he was, friendless and helpless. A man in the very flower of life, for he is not yet forty, with long years of happiness before him, and now condemned in one moment to a cruel and revolting death by dynamite! The square, he said, went round him like a thaumatrope. He saw the Alhambra leap into the air like a balloon and reeled against the railing. It is probable he fainted.

"My God!" he cried.

"You seem to be unwell, sir," said the hireling.

"I feel better now," cried poor McGuire, and with uneven steps, for the pavement of the square seemed to lurch and reel under his footing, he fled from the scene of this disaster. Fled? Alas, from what was he fleeing? Did he not carry that from which he fled along with him? And had he wings of the eagle, had he the swiftness of the ocean winds, could he have been rapt into the uttermost quarters of the earth, how should he escape the ruin that he carried? We have heard of living men who have been fettered to the dead. The grievance, soberly considered, is no more than sentimental; the case is but a flea bite to that of him who was linked, like poor McGuire, to an explosive bomb.

A thought struck him in Green street like the dart through his liver. Suppose it were the hour already. He stopped as though he had been shot and plucked his watch out. There was a howling in his ears as loud as a winter tempest. His sight was now obscured as if by a cloud, now, as by a lightning flash, would show him the very dust upon the street. But so brief were these intervals of vision and so violently did the watch vibrate in his hands that it was impossible to distinguish the numbers on the dial. He covered his eyes for a few seconds, and in that space it seemed to him that he had fallen to be a man of ninety. When he looked again the watch plate had grown legible. He had twenty minutes. Twenty minutes and no plan!

Green street at that time was very empty, and he now observed a little girl of about six drawing near to him, and as she came kicking in front of her, as children will, a piece of wood. She sang, too, and something in her accent, recalling him to the past, produced a sudden clearness in his mind. Here was God sent opportunity!

"My dear," said he, "would you like a present of a pretty box?"

The child cried aloud with joy and put out her hands to take it. She had looked first at the bag, like a true child, but most unfortunately before she had yet received the fatal gift her eyes fell directly on McGuire, and no sooner had she seen the poor gentleman's face than she screamed out and leaped backward as though she had seen the devil. Almost at the same moment a woman appeared upon the threshold of a neighboring shop and called upon the child in anger. "Come here, colleen," she said, "and don't be plaguing the poor old gentleman!" With that she re-entered the house, and the child followed her, sobbing aloud.

With the loss of this hope McGuire's reason swooned within him.

When next he awoke to consciousness he was standing before St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, waving like a drunken man, the passersby regarding him with eyes in which they read, as in a glass, an image of the terror and horror that dwelt within his own.

"I am afraid you are very ill, sir," observed a woman, stopping and gazing hard in his face. "Can I do anything to help you?"

"Ill?" said McGuire. "O God!" And then, recovering some shadow of his self command, "Chronic, madam," said he; "a long course of the dumb ague. But since you are so compassionate—an errand that I lack the strength to carry out," he gasped—"this bag to Portman square. Oh, compassionate woman, as you hope to be saved, as you are a mother, in the name of your babies that wait to welcome you at home, oh, take this bag to Portman square!"

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CHAPTER II.

Peril.

I suppose he had expressed himself with too much energy of voice, for the old woman was plainly taken with a certain fear of him.

"Poor gentleman!" said she. "If I were you I would go home." And she left him standing there in his distress.

"Home!" thought McGuire. "What a derision!"

What home was there for him, the victim of philanthropy? He thought of his old mother, of his happy youth; of the hideous, rending pang of the explosion; of the possibility that he might not be killed, that he might be cruelly mangled, crippled for life, condemned to lifelong pains, blinded perhaps and almost surely deafened.

Ah, you spoke lightly of the dynamiter's peril; but, even waiving death, have you realized what it is for a fine, brave young man of forty to be smitten suddenly with deafness, cut off from all the music of life and from the voice of friendship and love? How little do we realize the sufferings of others! Even your brutal government, in the heyday of its lust for cruelty, though it scruples not to hound the patriots with spies, to pack the corrupt jury, to bribe the hangman and to erect the infamous gallows, would hesitate to inflict so horrible a doom—not, I am well aware, from virtue, not from philanthropy, but with the fear before it of the withering scorn of the good.

But I wander from McGuire. From this dread glance into the past and the future his thoughts returned at a bound upon the present. How had he wandered there? And how long—oh, heaven, how long had he been about it? He pulled out his watch and found that but three minutes had elapsed. It seemed too bright a thing to be believed. He glanced at the church clock, and, sure enough, it marked an hour four minutes faster than the watch.

Of all that he endured McGuire declares that pang was the most desolate. Till then he had one friend, one counselor, in whom he plenarily trusted; by whose advertisement he numbered the minutes that remained to him of life; on whose sure testimony he could tell when the time was come to risk the last adventure, to cast the bag away from him and take to flight. And now in what was he to place reliance? His watch was slow. It might be losing time. If so, in what degree? What limit could he set to its derangement, and how much was it possible for a watch to lose in thirty minutes? Five? Ten? Fifteen? It might be so. Already it seemed years since he had left St. James' hall on this so promising enterprise. At any moment, then, the blow was to be looked for.

In the face of this new distress the wild disorder of his pulses settled down, and a broken weariness succeeded, as though he had lived for centuries and for centuries been dead. The buildings and the people in the street became incredibly small and far away and bright. London sounded in his ears stilly, like a whisper, and the rattle of the cab that nearly charged him down was like a sound from Africa. Meanwhile he was conscious of a strange abstraction from himself and heard and felt his footfalls on the ground as those of a very old, small, debile and tragically fortuned man, whom he sincerely pitied.

As he was thus moving forward past the National gallery in a medium, it seemed, of greater rarity and quiet than ordinary air there slipped into his mind the recollection of a certain entry in Whitcomb street, hard by, where he might perhaps lay down his tragic cargo unremarked. Thither, then, he bent his steps, seeming, as he went, to float above the pavement, and there, in the mouth of the entry, he found a man in a sleeved waistcoat, gravely chewing a straw. He passed him by and twice patrolled the entry, scouting for the barest chance, but the man had faced about and continued to observe him curiously.

Another hope was gone. McGuire reissued from the entry, still followed by the wondering eyes of the man in the sleeved waistcoat. He once more consulted his watch. There were but fourteen minutes left to him. At that, it seemed as if a sudden genial heat were spread about his brain. For a second or two he saw the world as red as blood and thereafter entered into a complete possession of himself, with an incredible cheerfulness of spirits, prompting him to sing and chuckle as he walked. And yet this mirth seemed to belong to things external, and within, like a black and leaden heavy kernel, he was conscious of the weight upon his soul.

"I care for nobody—no, not I—
And nobody cares for me."

he sung and laughed at the appropriate burden, so that the passengers stared upon him on the street. And still the warmth seemed to increase and to become more genial. What was life, he considered, and what he, McGuire? What even Erin, our green Erin?

All seemed so incalculably little that he smiled as he looked down upon it. He would have given years, had he possessed them, for a glass of spirits, but time failed, and he must deny himself this last indulgence.

At the corner of the Haymarket he very jauntily hailed a hansom cab, jumped in, bade the fellow drive him to a part of the embankment which he named and as soon as the vehicle was in motion concealed the bag as completely as he could under the vantage of the apron and once more drew out his watch. So he rode for five interminable minutes, his heart in his mouth at every jolt, scarce able to possess his terrors, yet fearing to wake the attention of the driver by too obvious a change of plan and willing if possible to leave him time to forget the Gladstone bag.

At length, at the head of some stairs on the embankment, he hailed. The cab was stopped, and he alighted—with how glad a heart! He thrust his hand in his pocket. All was over now. He had saved his life, nor that alone, but he had engineered a striking act of dynamite, for what could be more pictorial, what more effective, than the explosion of a hansom cab as it sped rapidly along the streets of London? He felt in one pocket, then in another. The most crushing seizure of despair descended on his soul, and, struck into abject dumbness, he stared upon the driver. He had not one penny.

"Hello!" said the driver. "Don't seem well!"

"Lost my money," said McGuire in tones so faint and strange that they surprised his hearing.

The man looked through the trap. "I dessay," said he; "you've left your bag."

McGuire half unconsciously fetched it out and, looking on that black continent at arm's length, withered inwardly and felt his features sharpen as with mortal sickness.

"This is not mine," said he. "Your last fare must have left it. You had better take it to the station."

"Now, look here," returned the cabman, "are you off your chump or am I?"

"Well, then, I'll tell you what," exclaimed McGuire, "you take it for your fare."

"Oh, I dessay," replied the driver. "Anything else? What's in your bag? Open it and let me see."

"No, no," returned McGuire. "Oh, no, not that. It's a surprise. It's prepared expressly. A surprise for honest cabmen."

"No, you don't!" said the man, alighting from his perch and coming very close to the unhappy patriot. "You're either going to pay my fare or get in again and drive to the office."

It was at this supreme hour of his distress that McGuire spied the stout figure of one Godall, a tobacconist, of Rupert street, drawing near along the embankment. The man was not unknown to him. He had bought of his wares and heard him quoted for the soul of liberality, and such was now the nearness of his peril that even at such a straw of hope he clutched with gratitude.

"Thank God!" he cried. "Here comes a friend of mine. I'll borrow." And he dashed to meet the tradesman. "Sir," said he, "Mr. Godall, I have dealt with you—you doubtless know my face—calamities for which I cannot blame myself have overwhelmed me. Oh, sir, for the love of innocence, for the sake of the bonds of humanity and as you hope for mercy at the throne of grace lend me two and six!"

"I do not recognize your face," replied Mr. Godall, "but I remember the cut of your beard, which I have the misfortune to dislike. Here, sir, is a sovereign, which I very willingly advance to you on the single condition that you shave your chin."

McGuire grasped the coin without a word, cast it to the cabman, calling out to him to keep the change, bounded down the steps, flung the bag far forth into the river and fell headlong after it. He was plucked from a watery grave, it is believed, by the hands of Mr. Godall. Even as he was being hoisted, dripping, to the shore a dull and choked explosion shook the solid masonry of the embankment, and far out in the river a momentary fountain rose and disappeared.

M'CULLER'S CREATION

"A PORTRAIT of Zuleika," tall, sheer, with the introspective gaze of old time saintship in the eyes that looked out from under gold shot hair lying in dappled rings across the forehead; short lips on which the paint gleamed fresh. McCuller bent his head critically.

"As good as you make 'em," suggested Pybus.

"No," said McCuller; "wants life."

Pybus raised himself on one elbow to look at the picture through half shut eyes. "Push it back against the portiere—so. Crimson sets it, as it were, in relief. There; that's better. Now she breathes."

"No; but I wish she did. Pybus, it is Pygmalion over again. I could love her if she lived."

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"Can we get this insane idea out of McCuller's head?"

"Don't know."

There was a knock at the door, and Stedd blew away a cloud of smoke as he said, "Come in!"

"I was told to come in."

"Yes," Stedd executed a bow, "Miss"—

"Peyton."

"Ah! Mr. Jones sent you?"

"Yes."

"Has he told you what you are to do?"

"Yes, sir. He said I was to stand in a frame and personate 'Zuleika' for a joke. I—he told me it was being done to ridicule a friend of his out of some morbid idea."

She broke off abruptly. Stedd thought she was going to cry.

"Mr. Jones offered me so much," she ended brokenly, "I could not refuse."

"No." The affair seemed gradually to be assuming tragic proportions. The two men exchanged looks.

"We shall wait outside the studio to hear the particulars of the joke," said Stedd half heartedly.

"It is tonight?" she asked in a resigned tone.

"Yes. Do you mind," he asked deferentially after he had explained matters—"will you stand here?"

Miss Peyton posed obediently against the canvas, from which the "Portrait of Zuleika" had disappeared. Soon after, as the two stared reflectively from their hiding place behind the stairs, McCuller passed them.

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McCuller threw himself into a chair.

From the alcove where the frame stood came subdued sighing, as of some one in trouble.

He strode toward the alcove and flung aside the portieres. They gazed at each other three minutes after that.

"You have forgotten me, of course; but, believe me, I would not have come had I known," she said.

"Who are you?"

"Dora Peyton. You helped me over a crossing with my father a year ago. It was raining."

"Yes; I remember now. Your father was"—

"Not himself." She drew in her breath quickly. "Then all at once she gave him her hand. "Oh, I have never forgotten! There were so many looking on and—laughing."

"Well, as a reward you have come here to— What is it that you have come here for, and who told you to come?"

"Your friend, Mr. Jones. He said you were"—

"Insane?"

"No, morbid about 'Zuleika.' I was to personate her."

"Were the boys going to play a joke on me? Well, you have spoiled it."

She started. "I did not think— Of course I will not take the money."

"Are you so much in need of money?"

"Yes."

"So it was your face that clung to me." McCuller smiled. And the girl herself? He had forgotten her entirely.

"You say you remember me?" he asked curiously.

She only nodded. She did not say, "Yes; I thought of you, dreamed of you as the one chivalrous hero amid countless scores of ruffians whom I knew."

"If I let you go," he said irrelevantly, "'Zuleika' will seem more dead to me than ever."

"Well, she is dead."

"Are you jealous of her?" he asked reflectively.

"No; I am not jealous. She is dead."

"That is true," he said. "Well, will you let me love you instead of 'Zuleika'?"

"If you wish it very much," she replied.

"So I have waked my 'Zuleika' after all," he said five minutes later and went to the head of the stairs and called:

"Come up here, you traitors!"